Russian Short Stories

The Outrage

Alexander Kuprin

The Outrage by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

Aleksandr I. Kuprin

32–40 minutes Translated from Russian by S. Koteliansky and J. M. Murry 5,919 words

Published ~1916

Translated from Russian by S. Koteliansky and J. M. Murry

A True Story

It was five o'clock on a July afternoon. The heat was terrible. The whole of the huge stone-built town breathed out heat like a glowing furnace. The glare of the white-walled house was insufferable. The asphalt pavements grew soft and burned the feet. The shadows of the acacias spread over the cobbled road, pitiful and weary. They too seemed hot. The sea, pale in the sunlight, lay heavy and immobile as one dead. Over the streets hung a white dust.

In the foyer of one of the private theatres a small committee of local barristers who had undertaken to conduct the cases of those who had suffered in the last pogrom against the Jews was reaching the end of its daily task. There were nineteen of them, all juniors, young, progressive and conscientious men. The sitting was without formality, and white ducks, flannels and white alpaca were in the majority. They sat anywhere, at little marble tables, and the chairman stood in front of an empty counter where chocolates were sold in the winter.

The barristers were quite exhausted by the heat which poured

in through the windows, with the dazzling sunlight and the noise of the streets. The proceedings went lazily and with a certain irritation.

A tall young man with a fair moustache and thin hair was in the chair. He was dreaming voluptuously how he would be off in an instant on his new-bought bicycle to the bungalow. He would undress quickly, and without waiting to cool, still bathed in sweat, would fling himself into the clear, cold, sweet-smelling sea. His whole body was enervated and tense, thrilled by the thought. Impatiently moving the papers before him, he spoke in a drowsy voice.

“So, Joseph Moritzovich will conduct the case of Rubinchik.… Perhaps there is still a statement to be made on the order of the day?”

His youngest colleague, a short, stout Karaim, very black and lively, said in a whisper so that everyone could hear: “On the order of the day, the best thing would be iced kvass.…”

The chairman gave him a stern side-glance, but could not restrain a smile. He sighed and put both his hands on the table to raise himself and declare the meeting closed, when the doorkeeper, who stood at the entrance to the theatre, suddenly moved forward and said: “There are seven people outside, sir. They want to come in.”

The chairman looked impatiently round the company.

“What is to be done, gentlemen?”

Voices were heard.

“Next time. Basta!”

“Let ’em put it in writing.”

“If they’ll get it over quickly. … Decide it at once.”

“Let ’em go to the devil. Phew! It’s like boiling pitch.”

“Let them in.” The chairman gave a sign with his head, annoyed. “Then bring me a Vichy, please. But it must be cold.”

The porter opened the door and called down the corridor: “Come in. They say you may.”

Then seven of the most surprising and unexpected individuals filed into the foyer. First appeared a full-grown, confident man in a smart suit, of the colour of dry sea-sand, in a magnificent pink shirt with white stripes and a crimson rose in his buttonhole. From the front his head looked like an upright bean, from the side like a horizontal bean. His face was adorned with a strong, bushy, martial moustache. He wore dark blue pince-nez on his nose, on his hands straw-coloured gloves. In his left hand he held a black walking-stick with a silver mount, in his right a light blue handkerchief.

The other six produced a strange, chaotic, incongruous impression, exactly as though they had all hastily pooled not merely their clothes, but their hands, feet and heads as well. There was a man with the splendid profile of a Roman senator, dressed in rags and tatters. Another wore an elegant dress waistcoat, from the deep opening of which a dirty little-Russian shirt leapt to the eye. Here were the unbalanced faces of the criminal type, but looking with a confidence that nothing could shake. All these men, in spite of their apparent youth, evidently possessed a large experience of life, an easy manner, a bold

approach, and some hidden, suspicious cunning.

The gentleman in the sandy suit bowed just his head, neatly and easily, and said with a half-question in his voice: “Mr. Chairman?”

“Yes. I am the chairman,” said the latter. “What is your business?”

“We—all whom you see before you,” the gentleman began in a quiet voice and turned round to indicate his companions, “we come as delegates from the United Rostov-Kharkov-and-Odessa-Nicolaiev Association of Thieves.”

The barristers began to shift in their seats.

The chairman flung himself back and opened his eyes wide. “Association of *what*?” he said, perplexed.

“The Association of Thieves,” the gentleman in the sandy suit coolly repeated. “As for myself, my comrades did me the signal honour of electing me as the spokesman of the deputation.”

“Very … pleased,” the chairman said uncertainly.

“Thank you. All seven of us are ordinary thieves—naturally of different departments. The Association has authorised us to put before your esteemed Committee”—the gentleman again made an elegant bow—“our respectful demand for assistance.”

“I don’t quite understand … quite frankly … what is the connection. …” The chairman waved his hands helplessly. “However, please go on.”

“The matter about which we have the courage and the honour to apply to you, gentlemen, is very clear, very simple, and very

brief. It will take only six or seven minutes. I consider it my duty to warn you of this beforehand, in view of the late hour and the 115 degrees that Fahrenheit marks in the shade." The orator expectorated slightly and glanced at his superb gold watch. "You see, in the reports that have lately appeared in the local papers of the melancholy and terrible days of the last pogrom, there have very often been indications that among the instigators of the pogrom who were paid and organised by the police—the dregs of society, consisting of drunkards, tramps, souteneurs, and hooligans from the slums—thieves were also to be found. At first we were silent, but finally we considered ourselves under the necessity of protesting against such an unjust and serious accusation, before the face of the whole of intellectual society. I know well that in the eye of the law we are offenders and enemies of society. But imagine only for a moment, gentlemen, the situation of this enemy of society when he is accused wholesale of an offence which he not only never committed, but which he is ready to resist with the whole strength of his soul. It goes without saying that he will feel the outrage of such an injustice more keenly than a normal, average, fortunate citizen. Now, we declare that the accusation brought against us is utterly devoid of all basis, not merely of fact but even of logic. I intend to prove this in a few words if the honourable committee will kindly listen."

"Proceed," said the chairman.

"Please do.... Please..." was heard from the barristers, now animated.

"I offer you my sincere thanks in the name of all my comrades.

Believe me, you will never repent your attention to the representatives of our… well, let us say, slippery, but nevertheless difficult, profession. 'So we begin,' as Giraldoni sings in the prologue to *Pagliacci*.

"But first I would ask your permission, Mr. Chairman, to quench my thirst a little.… Porter, bring me a lemonade and a glass of English bitter, there's a good fellow. Gentlemen, I will not speak of the moral aspect of our profession nor of its social importance. Doubtless you know better than I the striking and brilliant paradox of Proudhon: *La propriété c'est le vol*—a paradox if you like, but one that has never yet been refuted by the sermons of cowardly bourgeois or fat priests. For instance: a father accumulates a million by energetic and clever exploitation, and leaves to his son—a rickety, lazy, ignorant, degenerate idiot, a brainless maggot, a true parasite. Potentially a million roubles is a million working days, the absolutely irrational right to labour, sweat, life, and blood of a terrible number of men. Why? What is the ground or reason? Utterly unknown. Then why not agree with the proposition, gentlemen, that our profession is to some extent as it were a correction of the excessive accumulation of values in the hands of individuals, and serves as a protest against all the hardships, abominations, arbitrariness, violence, and negligence of the human personality, against all the monstrosities created by the bourgeois capitalistic organisation of modern society? Sooner or later, this order of things will assuredly be overturned by the social revolution. Property will pass away into the limbo of melancholy memories and with it, alas! we will disappear from

the face of the earth, we, *les braves chevaliers d'industrie*."

The orator paused to take the tray from the hands of the porter, and placed it near to his hand on the table.

"Excuse me, gentlemen.... Here, my good man, take this... and by the way, when you go out shut the door close behind you."

"Very good, your Excellency!" the porter bawled in jest.

The orator drank off half a glass and continued: "However, let us leave aside the philosophical, social, and economic aspects of the question. I do not wish to fatigue your attention. I must nevertheless point out that our profession very closely approaches the idea of that which is called art. Into it enter all the elements which go to form art—vocation, inspiration, fantasy, inventiveness, ambition, and a long and arduous apprenticeship to the science. From it is absent virtue alone, concerning which the great Karamzin wrote with such stupendous and fiery fascination. Gentlemen, nothing is further from my intention than to trifle with you and waste your precious time with idle paradoxes; but I cannot avoid expounding my idea briefly. To an outsider's ear it sounds absurdly wild and ridiculous to speak of the vocation of a thief. However, I venture to assure you that this vocation is a reality. There are men who possess a peculiarly strong visual memory, sharpness and accuracy of eye, presence of mind, dexterity of hand, and above all a subtle sense of touch, who are as it were born into God's world for the sole and special purpose of becoming distinguished cardsharpers. The pickpockets' profession demands extraordinary nimbleness and agility, a terrific certainty of movement, not to mention a ready wit, a

talent for observation and strained attention. Some have a positive vocation for breaking open safes: from their tenderest childhood they are attracted by the mysteries of every kind of complicated mechanism—bicycles, sewing machines, clockwork toys and watches. Finally, gentlemen, there are people with an hereditary animus against private property. You may call this phenomenon degeneracy. But I tell you that you cannot entice a true thief, and thief by vocation, into the prose of honest vegetation by any gingerbread reward, or by the offer of a secure position, or by the gift of money, or by a woman's love: because there is here a permanent beauty of risk, a fascinating abyss of danger, the delightful sinking of the heart, the impetuous pulsation of life, the ecstasy! You are armed with the protection of the law, by locks, revolvers, telephones, police and soldiery; but we only by our own dexterity, cunning and fearlessness. We are the foxes, and society—is a chicken-run guarded by dogs. Are you aware that the most artistic and gifted natures in our villages become horse-thieves and poachers? What would you have? Life has been so meagre, so insipid, so intolerably dull to eager and high-spirited souls!

"I pass on to inspiration. Gentlemen, doubtless you have had to read of thefts that were supernatural in design and execution. In the headlines of the newspapers they are called 'An Amazing Robbery,' or 'An Ingenious Swindle,' or again 'A Clever Ruse of the Mobsmen.' In such cases our bourgeois paterfamilias waves his hands and exclaims: 'What a terrible thing! If only their abilities were turned to good—their inventiveness, their amazing knowledge of human psychology, their self-possession,

their fearlessness, their incomparable histrionic powers! What extraordinary benefits they would bring to the country!' But it is well known that the bourgeois paterfamilias was specially devised by Heaven to utter commonplaces and trivialities. I myself sometimes—we thieves are sentimental people, I confess—I myself sometimes admire a beautiful sunset in Alexandra Park or by the seashore. And I am always certain beforehand that someone near me will say with infallible aplomb: 'Look at it. If it were put into a picture no one would ever believe it!' I turn round and naturally I see a self-satisfied, full-fed paterfamilias, who delights in repeating someone else's silly statement as though it were his own. As for our dear country, the bourgeois paterfamilias looks upon it as though it were a roast turkey. If you've managed to cut the best part of the bird for yourself, eat it quietly in a comfortable corner and praise God. But he's not really the important person. I was led away by my detestation of vulgarity and I apologise for the digression. The real point is that genius and inspiration, even when they are not devoted to the service of the Orthodox Church, remain rare and beautiful things. Progress is a law—and theft too has its creation.

"Finally, our profession is by no means as easy and pleasant as it seems to the first glance. It demands long experience, constant practice, slow and painful apprenticeship. It comprises in itself hundreds of supple, skilful processes that the cleverest juggler cannot compass. That I may not give you only empty words, gentlemen, I will perform a few experiments before you, now. I ask you to have every confidence in the

demonstrators. We are all at present in the enjoyment of legal freedom, and though we are usually watched, and every one of us is known by face, and our photographs adorn the albums of all detective departments, for the time being we are not under the necessity of hiding ourselves from anybody. If any one of you should recognise any of us in the future under different circumstances, we ask you earnestly always to act in accordance with your professional duties and your obligations as citizens. In grateful return for your kind attention we have decided to declare your property inviolable, and to invest it with a thieves' taboo. However, I proceed to business."

The orator turned round and gave an order: "Sesoi the Great, will you come this way!"

An enormous fellow with a stoop, whose hands reached to his knees, without a forehead or a neck, like a big, fair Hercules, came forward. He grinned stupidly and rubbed his left eyebrow in his confusion.

"Can't do nothin' here," he said hoarsely.

The gentleman in the sandy suit spoke for him, turning to the committee.

"Gentlemen, before you stands a respected member of our association. His speciality is breaking open safes, iron strong boxes, and other receptacles for monetary tokens. In his night work he sometimes avails himself of the electric current of the lighting installation for fusing metals. Unfortunately he has nothing on which he can demonstrate the best items of his repertoire. He will open the most elaborate lock

irreproachably.… By the way, this door here, it's locked, is it not?"

Everyone turned to look at the door, on which a printed notice hung: "Stage Door. Strictly Private."

"Yes, the door's locked, evidently," the chairman agreed.

"Admirable. Sesoi the Great, will you be so kind?"

"'Tain't nothin' at all," said the giant leisurely.

He went close to the door, shook it cautiously with his hand, took out of his pocket a small bright instrument, bent down to the keyhole, made some almost imperceptible movements with the tool, suddenly straightened and flung the door wide in silence. The chairman had his watch in his hands. The whole affair took only ten seconds.

"Thank you, Sesoi the Great," said the gentleman in the sandy suit politely. "You may go back to your seat."

But the chairman interrupted in some alarm: "Excuse me. This is all very interesting and instructive, but… is it included in your esteemed colleague's profession to be able to lock the door again?"

"Ah, *mille pardons*." The gentleman bowed hurriedly. "It slipped my mind. Sesoi the Great, would you oblige?"

The door was locked with the same adroitness and the same silence. The esteemed colleague waddled back to his friends, grinning.

"Now I will have the honour to show you the skill of one of our comrades who is in the line of picking pockets in theatres and

railway-stations," continued the orator. "He is still very young, but you may to some extent judge from the delicacy of his present work of the heights he will attain by diligence. Yasha!" A swarthy youth in a blue silk blouse and long glacé boots, like a gipsy, came forward with a swagger, fingering the tassels of his belt, and merrily screwing up his big, impudent black eyes with yellow whites.

"Gentlemen," said the gentleman in the sandy suit persuasively, "I must ask if one of you would be kind enough to submit himself to a little experiment. I assure you this will be an exhibition only, just a game."

He looked round over the seated company.

The short plump Karaim, black as a beetle, came forward from his table.

"At your service," he said amusingly.

"Yasha!" The orator signed with his head.

Yasha came close to the solicitor. On his left arm, which was bent, hung a bright-coloured, figured scarf.

"Suppose yer in church, or at a bar in one of the 'alls—or watchin' a circus," he began in a sugary, fluent voice. "I see straight off—there's a toff.... Excuse me, sir. Suppose you're the toff. There's no offence—just means a rich gent, decent enough, but don't know his way about. First—what's he likely to 'ave about 'im? All sorts. Mostly, a ticker and a chain. Whereabouts does 'e keep 'em. Somewhere in 'is top weskit pocket—'ere. Others 'ave 'em in the bottom pocket. Just 'ere. Purse—most always in the trousers, except when a greeny keeps it in 'is

jacket. Cigar-case. 'Ave a look first what it is—gold, silver—with a monogram. Leather—wot decent man 'd soil 'is 'ands? Cigar-case. Seven pockets: 'ere, 'ere 'ere, up there, there, 'ere and 'ere again. That's right, ain't it? That's 'ow you go to work."

As he spoke the young man smiled. His eyes shone straight into the barrister's. With a quick, dexterous movement of his right hand he pointed to various portions of his clothes.

"Then agen you might see a pin 'ere in the tie. 'Owever we do not appropriate. Such *gents* nowadays—they 'ardly ever wear a reel stone. Then I comes up to 'im. I begin straight off to talk to 'im like a gent: 'Sir, would you be so kind as to give me a light from your cigarette'—or something of the sort. At any rate, I enter into conversation. Wot's next? I look 'im straight in the peepers, just like this. Only two of me fingers are at it—just this and this." Yasha lifted two fingers of his right hand on a level with the solicitor's face, the forefinger and the middle finger and moved them about.

"D' you see? With these two fingers I run over the 'ole pianner. Nothin' wonderful in it: one, two, three—ready. Any man who wasn't stupid could learn easily. That's all it is. Most ordinary business. I thank you."

The pickpocket swung on his heel as if to return to his seat.

"Yasha!" The gentleman in the sandy suit said with meaning weight. "Yasha!" he repeated sternly.

Yasha stopped. His back was turned to the barrister, but he evidently gave his representative an imploring look, because the latter frowned and shook his head.

“Yasha!” he said for the third time, in a threatening tone.

“Huh!” The young thief grunted in vexation and turned to face the solicitor. “Where’s your little watch, sir?” he said in a piping voice.

“Ach,” the Karaim brought himself up sharp.

“You see—now you say ‘Ach,’ ” Yasha continued reproachfully. “All the while you were admiring me right ’and, I was operatin’ yer watch with my left. Just with these two little fingers, under the scarf. That’s why we carry a scarf. Since your chain’s not worth anything—a present from some *mamselle* and the watch is a gold one, I’ve left you the chain as a keepsake. Take it,” he added with a sigh, holding out the watch.

“But. … That is clever,” the barrister said in confusion. “I didn’t notice it at all.”

“That’s our business,” Yasha said with pride.

He swaggered back to his comrades. Meantime the orator took a drink from his glass and continued.

“Now, gentlemen, our next collaborator will give you an exhibition of some ordinary card tricks, which are worked at fairs, on steamboats and railways. With three cards, for instance, an ace, a queen, and a six, he can quite easily. … But perhaps you are tired of these demonstrations, gentlemen.” …

“Not at all. It’s extremely interesting,” the chairman answered affably. “I should like to ask one question—that is if it is not too indiscreet—what is your own speciality?”

“Mine. … H’m. … No, how could it be an indiscretion? … I work

the big diamond shops… and my other business is banks," answered the orator with a modest smile. "Don't think this occupation is easier than others. Enough that I know four European languages, German, French, English, and Italian, without speaking of Polish, Ukrainian and Yiddish. But shall I show you some more experiments, Mr. Chairman?"

The chairman looked at his watch.

"Unfortunately the time is too short," he said. "Wouldn't it be better to pass on to the substance of your business? Besides the experiments we have just seen have amply convinced us of the talent of your esteemed associates.… Am I not right, Isaac Abramovich?"

"Yes, yes… absolutely," the Karaim barrister readily confirmed.

"Admirable," the gentleman in the sandy suit kindly agreed. "My dear Count"—he turned to a blonde, curly-haired man, with a face like a billiard-maker on a bank-holiday—"put your instruments away. They will not be wanted. I have only a few words more to say, gentlemen. Now that you have convinced yourselves that our art, although it does not enjoy the patronage of high-placed individuals, is nevertheless an art; and you have probably come to my opinion that this art is one which demands many personal qualities besides constant labour, danger, and unpleasant misunderstandings—you will also, I hope, believe that it is possible to become attached to its practice and to love and esteem it, however strange that may appear at first sight. Picture to yourselves that a famous poet of talent, whose tales and poems adorn the pages of our best magazines, is suddenly offered the chance of writing verses at a

penny a line, signed into the bargain, as an advertisement for ‘Cigarettes Jasmine’—or that a slander was spread about one of you distinguished barristers, accusing him of making a business of concocting evidence for divorce cases, or of writing petitions from the cabmen to the governor in public-houses! Certainly your relatives, friends and acquaintances wouldn’t believe it. But the rumour has already done its poisonous work, and you have to live through minutes of torture. Now picture to yourselves that such a disgraceful and vexatious slander, started by God knows whom, begins to threaten not only your good name and your quiet digestion, but your freedom, your health, and even your life!

“This is the position of us thieves, now being slandered by the newspapers. I must explain. There is in existence a class of scum—passez-moi le mot—whom we call their ‘Mothers’ Darlings.’ With these we are unfortunately confused. They have neither shame nor conscience, a dissipated riffraff, mothers’ useless darlings, idle, clumsy drones, shop assistants who commit unskilful thefts. He thinks nothing of living on his mistress, a prostitute, like the male mackerel, who always swims after the female and lives on her excrements. He is capable of robbing a child with violence in a dark alley, in order to get a penny: he will kill a man in his sleep and torture an old woman. These men are the pests of our profession. For them the beauties and the traditions of the art have no existence. They watch us real, talented thieves like a pack of jackals after a lion. Suppose I’ve managed to bring off an important job—we won’t mention the fact that I have to leave

two-thirds of what I get to the receivers who sell the goods and discount the notes, or the customary subsidies to our incorruptible police—I still have to share out something to each one of these parasites, who have got wind of my job, by accident, hearsay, or a casual glance.

"So we call them *Motients*, which means 'half,' a corruption of *moitié*. … Original etymology. I pay him only because he knows and may inform against me. And it mostly happens that even when he's got his share he runs off to the police in order to get another half-sovereign. We, honest thieves. … Yes, you may laugh, gentlemen, but I repeat it: we honest thieves detest these reptiles. We have another name for them, a stigma of ignominy; but I dare not utter it here out of respect for the place and for my audience. Oh, yes, they would gladly accept an invitation to a pogrom. The thought that we may be confused with them is a hundred times more insulting to us even than the accusation of taking part in a pogrom.

"Gentlemen! While I have been speaking, I have often noticed smiles on your faces. I understand you: our presence here, our application for your assistance, and above all the unexpectedness of such a phenomenon as a systematic organisation of thieves, with delegates who are thieves, and a leader of the deputation, also a thief by profession—it is all so original that it must inevitably arouse a smile. But now I will speak from the depth of my heart. Let us be rid of our outward wrappings, gentlemen, let us speak as men to men.

"Almost all of us are educated, and all love books. We don't only read the adventures of Roqueambole, as the realistic

writers say of us. Do you think our hearts did not bleed and our cheeks did not burn from shame, as though we had been slapped in the face, all the time that this unfortunate, disgraceful, accursed, cowardly war lasted. Do you really think that our souls do not flame with anger when our country is lashed with Cossack-whips, and trodden underfoot, shot and spit at by mad, exasperated men? Will you not believe that we thieves meet every step towards the liberation to come with a thrill of ecstasy?

"We understand, every one of us—perhaps only a little less than you barristers, gentlemen—the real sense of the pogroms. Every time that some dastardly event or some ignominious failure has occurred, after executing a martyr in a dark corner of a fortress, or after deceiving public confidence, someone who is hidden and unapproachable gets frightened of the people's anger and diverts its vicious element upon the heads of innocent Jews. Whose diabolical mind invents these pogroms—these titanic blood-lettings, these cannibal amusements for the dark, bestial souls?

"We all see with certain clearness that the last convulsions of the bureaucracy are at hand. Forgive me if I present it imaginatively. There was a people that had a chief temple, wherein dwelt a bloodthirsty deity, behind a curtain, guarded by priests. Once fearless hands tore the curtain away. Then all the people saw, instead of a god, a huge, shaggy, voracious spider, like a loathsome cuttlefish. They beat it and shoot at it: it is dismembered already; but still in the frenzy of its final agony it stretches over all the ancient temple its disgusting,

clawing tentacles. And the priests, themselves under sentence of death, push into the monster's grasp all whom they can seize in their terrified, trembling fingers.

"Forgive me. What I have said is probably wild and incoherent. But I am somewhat agitated. Forgive me. I continue. We thieves by profession know better than anyone else how these pogroms were organised. We wander everywhere: into public houses, markets, teashops, dosshouses, public places, the harbour. We can swear before God and man and posterity that we have seen how the police organise the massacres, without shame and almost without concealment. We know them all by face, in uniform or disguise. They invited many of us to take part; but there was none so vile among us as to give even the outward consent that fear might have extorted.

"You know, of course, how the various strata of Russian society behave towards the police? It is not even respected by those who avail themselves of its dark services. But we despise and hate it three, ten times more—not because many of us have been tortured in the detective departments, which are just chambers of horror, beaten almost to death, beaten with whips of ox-hide and of rubber in order to extort a confession or to make us betray a comrade. Yes, we hate them for that too. But we thieves, all of us who have been in prison, have a mad passion for freedom. Therefore we despise our gaolers with all the hatred that a human heart can feel. I will speak for myself. I have been tortured three times by police detectives till I was half dead. My lungs and liver have been shattered. In the mornings I spit blood until I can breathe no more. But if I were

told that I will be spared a fourth flogging only by shaking hands with a chief of the detective police, I would refuse to do it!

“And then the newspapers say that we took from these hands Judas-money, dripping with human blood. No, gentlemen, it is a slander which stabs our very soul, and inflicts insufferable pain. Not money, nor threats, nor promises will suffice to make us mercenary murderers of our brethren, nor accomplices with them.”

“Never … No … No …,” his comrades standing behind him began to murmur.

“I will say more,” the thief continued. “Many of us protected the victims during this pogrom. Our friend, called Sesoi the Great—you have just seen him, gentlemen—was then lodging with a Jewish braid-maker on the Moldavanka. With a poker in his hands he defended his landlord from a great horde of assassins. It is true, Sesoi the Great is a man of enormous physical strength, and this is well known to many of the inhabitants of the Moldavanka. But you must agree, gentlemen, that in these moments Sesoi the Great looked straight into the face of death. Our comrade Martin the Miner—this gentleman here”—the orator pointed to a pale, bearded man with beautiful eyes who was holding himself in the background—“saved an old Jewess, whom he had never seen before, who was being pursued by a crowd of these *canaille*. They broke his head with a crowbar for his pains, smashed his arm in two places and splintered a rib. He is only just out of hospital. That is the way our most ardent and determined members acted. The others

trembled for anger and wept for their own impotence.

“None of us will forget the horrors of those bloody days and bloody nights lit up by the glare of fires, those sobbing women, those little children’s bodies torn to pieces and left lying in the street. But for all that not one of us thinks that the police and the mob are the real origin of the evil. These tiny, stupid, loathsome vermin are only a senseless fist that is governed by a vile, calculating mind, moved by a diabolical will.

“Yes, gentlemen,” the orator continued, “we thieves have nevertheless merited your legal contempt. But when you, noble gentlemen, need the help of clever, brave, obedient men at the barricades, men who will be ready to meet death with a song and a jest on their lips for the most glorious word in the world—Freedom—will you cast us off then and order us away because of an inveterate revulsion? Damn it all, the first victim in the French Revolution was a prostitute. She jumped up on to a barricade, with her skirt caught elegantly up into her hand and called out: ‘Which of you soldiers will dare to shoot a woman?’ Yes, by God.” The orator exclaimed aloud and brought down his fist on to the marble table top: “They killed her, but her action was magnificent, and the beauty of her words immortal.

“If you should drive us away on the great day, we will turn to you and say: ‘You spotless Cherubim—if human thoughts had the power to wound, kill, and rob man of honour and property, then which of you innocent doves would not deserve the knout and imprisonment for life?’ Then we will go away from you and build our own gay, sporting, desperate thieves’ barricade, and

will die with such united songs on our lips that you will envy us, you who are whiter than snow!

“But I have been once more carried away. Forgive me. I am at the end. You now see, gentlemen, what feelings the newspaper slanders have excited in us. Believe in our sincerity and do what you can to remove the filthy stain which has so unjustly been cast upon us. I have finished.”

He went away from the table and joined his comrades. The barristers were whispering in an undertone, very much as the magistrates of the bench at sessions. Then the chairman rose.

“We trust you absolutely, and we will make every effort to clear your association of this most grievous charge. At the same time my colleagues have authorised me, gentlemen, to convey to you their deep respect for your passionate feelings as citizens. And for my own part I ask the leader of the deputation for permission to shake him by the hand.”

The two men, both tall and serious, held each other’s hands in a strong, masculine grip.

The barristers were leaving the theatre; but four of them hung back a little by the clothes peg in the hall. Isaac Abramovich could not find his new, smart grey hat anywhere. In its place on the wooden peg hung a cloth cap jauntily flattened in on either side.

“Yasha!” The stern voice of the orator was suddenly heard from the other side of the door. “Yasha! It’s the last time I’ll speak to you, curse you! … Do you hear?”

The heavy door opened wide. The gentleman in the sandy suit

entered. In his hands he held Isaac Abramovich's hat; on his face was a well-bred smile.

"Gentlemen, for Heaven's sake forgive us—an odd little misunderstanding. One of our comrades exchanged his hat quite by accident. … Oh, it is yours! A thousand pardons. Doorkeeper! Why don't you keep an eye on things, my good fellow, eh? Just give me that cap, there. Once more, I ask you to forgive me, gentlemen."

With a pleasant bow and the same well-bred smile he made his way quickly into the street.